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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on a key change that the author has experienced in the practice of program evaluation research over the past 20 years: the accommodation of the logic of science and the psychology of politics. This change has substantially altered the role of the evaluator, the evaluator's relationship with clients, the design of an evaluation study, and the training of evaluators at the Ph.D. level. The role of evaluator used to be that of a scientist highly reliant on technical skills who was called upon to do brief studies, draft and implement the design, and deliver the final report, all for a fixed price contract. During the last 10 years, this role has changed considerably, primarily because of the longer duration of the evaluation projects and the higher level of engagement between the evaluator and the client. As a consequence, evaluation designs have become more evolutionary in design; an initial "evaluation research matrix" is modified over time in consultation with the client, and the final report is replaced by a series of interim reports on specific questions which in turn are revised as data come in. This shift in design and practice of evaluation arose in response to the need to resolve conflict among contending parties at an institution by delivering useful information in a timely manner. Preparation of Ph.D. students in evaluation research accordingly has come to rely much more on their early first-hand engagement with field problems as members of evaluation teams. The author concludes that evaluation research is likely to continue to be involved with contextual politics as well as technical demands. (TE)

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Evaluation Research and Program Evaluation Retrospect and Prospect: A Reformulation of the Role of the Evaluator

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Since I can not in this essay dwell on the myraid of changes I've experienced in the practice of evaluation research over the past two decades, I'm going to limit myself to focusing on two key changes that I found rather startling as I reviewed my own participation in evaluation projects over the last 20 years.

A key change I see is one that I label as the accomodation of the logic of science and the psychology of politics. This major change has substantially altered the role of the evaluator, the evaluator's relationship with clients, the way one costs out an evaluation study and greatly influences the training of evaluators at the Ph.D. level.

In the earlier studies in which I was engaged some 20 years ago, the evaluator was a scientist, heavily reliant upon a series of technical skills. Once a client came and engaged you as an evaluator, the problem was dumped on your desk and one proceeded to puzzle through a design - principally giving attention to internal validity questions, goal appraisal and fixing on outcome measures. It is of interest that this type of study was carried out chiefly with universities and suburban school systems as clients. Other characteristics of these studies were: (1) short, limited duration, usually carried out over a few months, (2) the

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evaluator was responsible for drafting and implementing the design, (3) end results culminated in a final report, (4) a final report, often the only report, was delivered to the administrator who engaged you, and (5) there was a fixed price contract with agreed on deliverables. Not infrequently after the contract was signed, there was little contact between the evaluator and the client who engaged him until the delivery of the final report.

A considerable change in the role of the evaluator has evolved when I compared the projects over the past ten years with those of the previous ten years. Foremost is that our relationship with the client has changed drastically and this is where I see the fusing of scientific logic and the psychology of politics. As a University office in evaluation research we have engaged in evaluation projects with fewer clients but the level of intensity of the evaluations has greatly increased and the time span lengthened. We have clients with whom we have worked on evaluation projects for as long as 10 years. Not uncommonly, the long range client is engaged in curriculum or program development. As the evaluation moves with the development cycle the requirements of the evaluation has shifted.

In one evaluation interface lasting over ten years we have been engaged with a client who has been developing a national curriculum. Our evaluation has shifted in design emphasis as it followed the curriculum development cycle and as I charted these twists and turns in evaluation to serve client needs, I began to

synthesize how our program evaluation practice had radically shifted from being highly technical to sensitivity to the psychological factors that were strong contextual elements contributing to the projects form.

When as evaluators we were engaged by the project sponsors, curriculum development had been stalemated for over a year with the organization immobilized by the disagreements over design constructs, their provisioning and parameters, e.g. should you have a free standing curriculum or should it be fitted into the regular core subjects. To move the curriculum development off center, a needs assessment was devised which incorporated the major points of disagreement on the project team and a questionnaire was administered to a national sample of teachers and administrators. The needs assessment was quite specific in pinpointing the arguments and eliciting responses to suggested alternatives from the sample of potential users. It served its purpose well in clearing away much of the ideological garbage which characterizes these theoretical non-data based arguments which effectively styme action. With the stalemate broken the writing of the curriculum began and the evaluation consultant assisted with developing the evaluation sections, tests and other informal teacher assessments which were to be used in the package. Following the completion of the first phase of the curriculum (K-6), the evaluators designed and conducted the first field tests. Subsequent sections, grades 7-12 were developed field tested and published with the assistance of outside evaluators. Now ten

years later a full scale evaluation of the curriculum is underway; a curriculum that by now has been used by 50% of the nations school children. Attention to revision of methods, updating of content and context factors effecting implementation prompted changes in the most recent evaluation design as well as the evaluators relationship to the client. Thus the evaluation from the first needs assessment to the evaluation of a matured curriculum used over a period of years presents a sharp contrast in design and highlights the merger of the technical and the political in the solution of program design problems.

A major change which highlights the merger of the scientific and the politics is the evolutionary nature of our evaluation designs. In our Office of Evaluation Research we develop a concise statement of the evaluation design which we entitle an evaluation research matrix. On one sheet we map out the basic characteristics of the evaluation design, the populations, the data to be collected, instrumentation, sources, responsible party, comparatives and analytic tools to be used with the data. Instead of a fixed design set in advance our later projects finds the evaluator developing the matrix with the client and it is revised as the project moves over time. Concomitantly the style and type of report has changed. The final report is replaced by a series of interim reports on specific questions which in turn are revised as data comes in. In short, the process has moved from one that was set very much in advance to one that requires a continuing interface with the client and is largely evolutionary.

How did this come about? It was not a rational linear decision, rather it overtook us as we worked in evaluation in very tense settings where contending parties had generated considerable conflict and clients were desperately searching for satisfactory ways to control and resolve conflict while getting on with the main business of the institution. Further, we became concerned about the usefulness of evaluation findings in guiding decision making. In retrospect I see this different evaluator-client stance a resultant of trying to meet clients' demands for useful information delivered in a timely manner. While conflict has not disappeared in our evaluations, this shift in practice has become much more manageable and project life more satisfying to our clients who continue to utilize evaluation over the long term, over 10 years continuing relationship, in several cases. Moreover, we are much more satisfied with the implementation of evaluation results by clients.

In 1983 we had empirical verification of the change in our approach to evaluation over the past 20 years in a doctoral dissertation (Duggan, 1983) who investigated a sample of 14 studies done by our evaluation office and traced back evidence of implementation of findings and client satisfaction. Duggan found that the greatest contributor to the enhancement of utilization of findings in the most successful evaluations came when an evaluation assumed an "educative" approach to the client throughout the evaluation process. The educative approach was characterized as the evaluator assisting the group to probe the

the issues, clarify the questions, articulate the evaluation design and agree on responsibilities for carrying out the various functions in the evaluation, i.e. instrument administration and data gathering. As one might expect, Duggan found collinear to the educative approach was a client's disposition to use. However, and most importantly for the design of evaluation and the training of evaluators, she found that in the studies where there was major use of findings that use was not restricted by the type of organization in which the evaluation was conducted, the evaluator (personal variables), the design of the evaluation (type, survey, experimental), nor source of funding for the evaluation. This latter body of evidence prompted Duggan to conclude, "these findings lend support to the stance that evaluation should be regarded as an applied science and is, therefore, a viable field for research and scholarly training." (Duggan, 1983, p. 128). In sum, Duggan's research confirmed the metamorphose that our evaluation practice had been undergoing as we empirically groped our way to improving the relationship between evaluation and its use in improvement of project functioning and policy making. A review of the types of projects we conduct and how we allocate our time in an evaluation reveals significant change with again much more emphasis on working with the psychological variables than in the past.

We still do some short term evaluation research projects but they are chiefly audits and we do not attempt formal experi-

mental or quasi-experimental designs. Again our practice in these short-term studies is still much more interactive with clients than it was ten years ago. For example, we recently did some evaluation consulting for a university which had requested evaluative assistance in problems in administrative organization, curriculum, faculty development, and business operations. As is always the case, these broad areas, with a little data gathering, came into sharper focus as specific problems. One problem concerned breaking a faculty committee deadlock on purchase of property, a deadlock that threatened the loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars if it was not quickly resolved. In resolving this problem we put into practice some of our evaluative processes that we have learned from experience with long term clients in the past - 1) clarify the questions, 2) stating the problem in a technical sense stripping away as nearly as possible ideological arguments, 3) gathering data which in this case meant assessing land values and drafting out program options, 4) and finally presenting a way to arrive at a best option with substantiating data. All these steps involved working closely with the client, letting the next step be determined by the resolution obtained in the previous step. Technical evaluation design is still important but it can not set a design in advance as the dynamic of the situation specifies the evolution of the evaluation design from immediate findings and needs.

Some other significant changes in our practice are that we do much less mindless computer processing of data, and we give

far more attention to the reporting of findings, their presentation to clients and interpretation for utilization. Because of the close association with the client, the evaluator becomes involved with the program design. And long ago we found many of the evaluation problems which were brought to us are really design problems and not evaluation problems. Not frequently a project is too inadequately conceptualized to permit the building of an evaluation design and the evaluator must work with a client on designing an operational project. However, this does not preclude an evaluator practicing his science and art as different levels of evaluation come into play in the design of a project and the subsequent operational phase. One of the documents that came out of our evaluation work on transactional evaluation (Rippey, 1973) gave attention to the contribution of evaluation in the early design of a project in resolving problems generated by conflict and indecision. In the transactional evaluation approach the evaluator is interactively involved with the client in unravelling the problems of design through use of evaluation tools. As the project becomes operational the evaluation design moves toward the more conventional quasi and experimental evaluation designs that are the stock tools in trade (Cook and Campbell, 1979).

These changes have caused us to reexamine how we prepare Ph.D. students in evaluation research. Perhaps because of the context in which they have been raised, our evaluation research

graduate students are enarmored with the technical and infatuated with the computer. As the evaluator's position has shifted we have found that we have had to increase their knowledge and understanding of program design. Thus, we have increased formal coursework in curriculum and policy research and must take precautions that these are not neglected in the pursuit of the scientific technical. Students are no different than many experienced evaluators in their propensity for running off after numbers and shunning the dirty work of staying close to field based data. After ten years experience with this shift to the importance of politics of evaluation, we find an essential in the training of Ph.D. students comes from first hand engagement with field problems as members of evaluation teams. Thus, we find a need for multilevel types of evaluation projects for training our students. As quickly as possible we get students into directly interfacing with clients in field projects where the cookbook designs don't neatly fit and the obstacles to evaluation involve the psyches of the clients as much as technical problems of data gathering and analysis. It is only through feeling the heat of conflict, negotiating out compromise solutions, protecting their own professional integrity and becoming aware of the true meaning of dead line, that they become socialized and effective program evaluators.

As for the future, I believe the following well established trends will continue: (1) close interaction of the evaluator and client throughout the life of a project using multilevel

evaluation, (2) evolving rather than fixed evaluation designs, (3) addressing of design questions and findings to numerous interest groups giving equal attention to the contextual politics involved as well as the technical demands. The technical-scientific is still important, but it is not the whole of evaluation research, even though we have in the past taught evaluation research as if it consisted of only narrow scientific models. Evaluation research appears to be moving more toward policy oriented research, and more directed to providing evidence on specific practical problems in a timely fashion.

Evaluation research in the future will probably continue to mirror the social changes of the culture. Currently evaluation and evaluators are unpopular in a number of quarters where social intervention by government agencies to improve the quality of life is labelled with the opprobrious term "social engineering." Consequently, we see evaluation efforts short circuited and evaluators dismissed especially at the federal level as ideology overrides facts. Certainly the growth curve in evaluation which has characterized it over the past two decades has been interrupted, and evaluation as a concomitant of government sponsored social and research programs is on the shelf. Nevertheless, the programs that stimulated the growth of evaluation research were rooted in problems that remain unresolved and continue to grow. An ideological stance which dismisses the social problems of education, unemployment, health and poverty as residing exclusively in individual frailty is not a solution but a salve for

a philosophy of individual greed which can only spawn domestic discontent and class welfare.

The upward trend lines on social problems are inexorable. As pressure mounts and confusion ensues among administrators, bureaucrats, and policy makers, they will be seeking assistance from any source. Consequently, the evaluator who can scientifically manage the technical and skillfully navigate the political will be in demand. As an applied discipline that speaks to democratic resolution of social problems and mitigation of conflict the prospects for effective evaluators is, indeed, very bright. Evaluators capacity to register a contribution lies in their ability to enact in the natural settings where the problems exist, the reformulated role which is an outgrowth from emergent experience with evaluation results that are useful to policy makers and practitioners. The role of evaluators is being recast; their contributory usefulness is well established.

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